

Why Roman remains remain

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A large number of Roman monuments survive in pretty good condition in Italy, France, and Spain. Very few survive in Britain, and of those that do, only traces at ground level remain.

Ah, you may say – what about all those lovely Roman villas? Hundreds of them, all over Southern Britain! Precisely, is my reply. These survive in the form of fine mosaic floors and foundations only.

Romanists in Britain are sadly short of aqueducts straddling valleys, of theatres filled with modern drama festivals and amphitheatres where crowds gather to watch bull fighting.

Yet go to Provence, Rome's favourite 'provincia', and you'll find Roman remains which are recognisable as buildings. Stroll round Arles and you will see an amphitheatre, still towering above the medieval town. 20 miles down the road in Nimes it is the same story: a twin amphitheatre with seating space for 20,000. Straddling the River Gardon you will still find the Pont du Gard, the most spectacular part of the 30-mile system which used to supply Nimes with water.

Further inland Orange, St Remy (Glanum, to the Romans) and Vaison-la-Romaine all sport Roman remains which British archaeologists would give their best trowels for: a riot of triumphal arches, theatres, villas . . .

Recycling or isolation

So what's the secret? Were the Romans of Provence better builders? Did they use better building materials? Why do their Roman remains look so much better than ours? Why were they not destroyed by plundering barbarians?

As we will see by examining Roman remains of France and Britain, for Roman buildings to survive the centuries, there are three prerequisites: firstly, buildings must be of good, durable stone; secondly, they must be capable of alternative uses in less opulent societies. In other words, they must be recyclable. And thirdly, there is the secret hidden extra: enthusiastic and sensitive restoration.

Recycling is the secret of survival in a populous area like the south of France. In Britain one does occasionally encounter an alternative solution: complete isolation. The Romans were daft enough to build a fortress complete with baths at the top of Hardknott Pass in the Lake

District. Here at the top of the mountain the Roman architecture was protected from marauding barbarians and quarrying medieval house builders – because the fortress was too isolated!

Vandal-proof stone

Firstly, it must be stressed that Roman Provence was rich, far richer than Britain and far more attractive to the Romans. This is where Cicero's friend Milo spent a jolly exile, feasting on red mullet after murdering Clodius, his political rival.

Classical civilisation got off to an early start here, and the Greeks actually got here before the Romans (Marseilles was originally a Greek colony, Massalia). The Romans moved in soon after when the citizens of Massalia sensibly sided with them against Hannibal during the Second Carthaginian War (218-203). They actually invited the Romans to help them keep the Gauls at bay, and it was not long before Gallia Narbonensis, as it eventually became, was a thriving province.

The Emperor Augustus clearly liked the place: he built the Maison Carrée at Nimes, a classical temple complete with that rare Roman remain: a roof! It originally sported an inscription to his grandsons, Gaius and Lucius, Today tourists can still wander round this temple and shelter from the rain. A few miles away at Glanum, there is a huge roadside mausoleum, 60 feet high, built by Augustus to honour these same grandsons.

On the other hand, in Britain, it is likely that many of the buildings had stone footings only. The grand villas and theatres almost certainly had walls of half-timbered material, resting on foundations of more durable, costlier stone.

So what happened if a group of marauding pirates encountered a Roman villa in Britain? They robbed it and then torched it. Thus the end of Cogidubnus' palace at Fishbourne at the end of the third century.

Nowhere was proof against barbarian raids as the Roman Empire slowly disintegrated. The Vandals even reached Rome and pinched the tiles from the imperial palace in the fifth century. Southern France suffered her share of raids and consequent damage, just as Britain did. The difference was that her stone buildings were far more proof against serious damage. So the aqueduct of Nimes, the Pont du Gard, was breached several times and by the fourth century the water system ceased to be maintained. But although the pipes within silted up, the massive arches remained.

Built to last

Stone buildings certainly require some degree of maintenance but they will not fall into ruin as fast as your half-timbered Romano-British villa. The former is easy to restore, the latter is probably not worth bothering about after a few years of neglect: it soon becomes easier to just build a new home, recycling the brick and stone from the ruined old villa; in other words, treat it as a quarry.

A huge structure such as the Pont du Gard will provide vast quantities of stone before it disappears. Indeed, small sections at the top, next to the hillside, have been quarried. But it is far too well built to be much affected by such a slight raid. And wholesale demolition would be a massive job which would not justify the end product.

The grand stone public buildings of Gallia Narbonensis didn't just look good: they were truly built to last. So in the fifth century, when Roman rule collapsed, the buildings were still in good enough condition to be recycled! It was this continuity of use which meant that they continued to be maintained and did not decay or turn into convenient quarries.

In contrast, in Britain, it seems that city life as we know it virtually died by the end of the second century. City walls acted as fortresses in times of need and so in the cities of Britain rich black soil lies over the remains of public buildings, even in fourth-century London, the result of farming. Only fortifications survive above ground level, precisely because these were built entirely of stone and remained in use: city walls in London and Chester, Saxon Shore forts at Pevensey and Portchester, on the south coast of England.

The rich lived in rural isolation, in the many huge villas which sprang up in the fourth century. These lacked major stone fortifications but certainly their durable stone features survive as bath houses, hypocausts, and fancy mosaics: pretty but with no obvious alternative uses!

Continuous use

Back in Southern France, take the largest of all the public monuments, the amphitheatres of Aries and Nimes. Both were turned into fortresses by the Vandals who conquered Gallia Narbonensis in the fifth century! At both arenas remains of the medieval moats are easy to spot and indeed at Aries three of the four medieval watchtowers still remain.

During the Middle Ages these fortresses turned into cramped towns. At Aries there were 2 chapels and more than 200 houses on the several tiers. In the eighteenth century more than 700 people called the Nimes amphitheatre home: it had become a slum!

Restoration and slum clearance began in the last century: 1809 at Nimes and 1825 at Aries. Asking how much of what we think of as Roman really is 2,000 years old is a dangerous question. . .

The Maison Carrée has a similar history. This fine Roman temple to the Imperial Cult became a public building in the early Middle Ages. The local canon took residence in 1015 followed, appropriately, by the city consuls, who later turned it into their stables. In 1670 Augustinian friars converted it into a church and finally, during the Revolution, it was sold as public property to the Department. Vigorous restoration has continued since and at present it is a public monument, the centre of a new up-market square (or forum?). Entry is free and the interior is totally bare, but for some truly hideous modern murals.

The most impressive Roman monument in Provence is probably the Pont Du Gard. This huge aqueduct was used as a road and was considerably restored in the nineteenth century, this time by the Emperor Napoleon III, who took great pride in his Roman forebears. Yet here again there is evidence for continual use throughout the Middle Ages. Stonemasons would visit the aqueduct as a type of craftsman's pilgrimage. Their finely chiselled initials may be seen on the lower tier. In the eighteenth century a convenient bridge was tacked onto the base.

Wherever one looks, it becomes quite clear that the buildings of Roman France were grander than those of Britain: better built, of high quality stone (many of Britain's public monuments and villas were almost certainly wooden above the firm stone footings). They were capable of use and re-use. They were maintained well enough to outlast Roman rule, strong enough to be re-used and in sufficiently good order to justify massive restoration.

Robber barons and Hadrian's Wall

But for those of us who crave the real Roman thing, none of this survival as something else is complete without restoration. Centuries of rebuilding need to be removed to get back to the original version – or what scholars assure us is the original version. We can see how this is the case if we consider Britain's finest Roman monument, Hadrian's Wall.

Here on the ancient borders of the Roman Empire we see a similar process. After the collapse of Roman rule, there was no obvious use for such an elaborate frontier. Much of Hadrian's Wall was therefore used as a quarry, metamorphosing into such fine medieval buildings as Lanercost Priory and Thirlwall Castle, Greenhead. Much more of the fine Hadrianic stone has ended up as dry-stone walling. Older houses near the wall are all built from that characteristic reddy-brown limestone.

In the wildest part of the border country lies Housesteads Roman fort, Vercovicium to the Romans. Here the population was too thin to decimate Hadrian's Wall. Housesteads was therefore in a good enough condition to be turned into a fortress in the later Middle Ages by a family of robber barons, the Armstrongs, a thousand years after the Roman soldiers had moved on. Remains of the Armstrong ovens can still be seen in the southern gate-house. The unpleasant nature of this family is suggested by the technical name for this type of border fortress: a bastle.

In the nineteenth century there was a major restoration programme and much of the Wall as we see it today was literally rebuilt, using original masonry that had been re-used as field boundaries.

So here on Hadrian's Wall we see the same triple process needed for good archaeological remains: excellent construction, of top-quality stone; re-use and therefore maintenance; and sensitive, enthusiastic restoration.

Again, the difficult question is how much of what we call Roman was actually constructed during the Roman period. But certainly the effect is far more spectacular than mere wall foundations could ever be. We are indeed fortunate that the antiquarians of nineteenth-century Britain, as in France, had the confidence and funds needed to restore their remains well enough that they will make sense to a visitor.

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